A picture containing text

Description automatically generatedpent the rest

of his life praying, and working at his music.

His father, shortly before his death, had obtained for him a position

as organist in one of the churches of Madrid, with a salary of

seventy cents a day. This was scarcely sufficient to meet the running

expenses of a house, however modest; so within a fortnight Juan sold

all that had constituted the furniture of his humble home, dismissed

his servant, and took a room at a boarding-house, for which he paid

forty cents a day; the remaining thirty cents covered all his other

expenses. He lived thus for several months without leaving his room

except to fulfil his obligations. His only walks were from the house

to the church, and from the church back again. His grief weighed

upon him so heavily that he never opened his lips. He spent the long

hours of the day composing a grand requiem Mass for the repose of

his father's soul, depending upon the charity of the parish for its

execution; and although it would be incorrect to say that he strained

his five senses,--on account of his having but four,--it can at least

be said that he threw all the energies of his body and soul into his

work.

The ministerial crisis overtook him before his task was half

finished. I do not remember who came into power, whether the

Radicals, Conservatives, or Constitutionals; at any rate, there was

some great change. The news reached Juan late, and to his sorrow.

The new cabinet soon judged him, in his capacity as an organist, to

be a dangerous citizen, and felt that from the heights of the choir,

at vespers or in the solemnity of the Mass, with the swell and the

roar from all the stops of the organ, he was evincing sentiments of

opposition which were truly scandalous. The new ministers were ill

disposed, as they declared in Congress through the lips of one of

their authorized members, "to tolerate any form of imposition," so

they proceeded with praiseworthy energy to place Juan on the retired

list, and to find him a substitute whose musical manoeuvres might

offer a better guarantee,--a man, in a word, who would prove more

loyal to the institutions. On being officially informed of this,

the blind one experienced no emotion beyond surprise. In the deep

recesses of his heart he was pleased, as he was thus left more time

in which to work at his Mass. The situation appeared to him in its

real light only when his landlady, at the end of the month, came to

him for money. He had none to give her, naturally, as his salary had

been withdrawn; and he was compelled to pawn his father's watch,

after which he resumed his work with perfect serenity and without a

thought of the future. But the landlady came again for money at the

end of another month, and he once more pawned a jewel of the scant

paternal legacy; this was a small diamond ring. In a few months there

was nothing left to pawn. So the landlady, in consideration of his

helplessness, kept him two or three days beyond the time and then

turned him out, with the self-congratulatory feeling of having acted

generously in not claiming his trunk and clothes, from which she

might have realized the few cents that he still owed her.

He looked for another lodging, but was unable to rent a piano, which

was a sore trial to him; evidently he could not finish his Mass. He

knew a shopkeeper who owned a piano and who permitted him to make

use of it. But Juan soon noticed that his visits grew more and more

inopportune, so he left off going. Shortly, too, he was turned out

of his new lodgings, only this time they kept his trunk. Then came

a period of misery and anguish,--of that misery of which it is hard

to conceive. We know that life has few joys for the homeless and

the poor, but if in addition they be blind and alone, surely they

have found the limit of human suffering. Juan was tossed about from

lodging to lodging, lying in bed while his only shirt was being

washed, wandering through the streets of Madrid with torn shoes, his

trousers worn to a fringe about his feet, his hair long, and his

beard unshaven. Some compassionate fellow-lodger obtained a position

for him in a café, from which, however, he was soon turned out, for

its frequenters did not relish his music. He never played popular

dances or peteneras, no fandangos, not even an occasional polka.

His fingers glided over the keys in dreamy ecstasies of Beethoven

and Chopin, and the audience found some difficulty in keeping time

with their spoons. So out he went again through the byways of the

capital. Every now and then some charitable soul, accidentally

brought in contact with his misery, assisted him indirectly, for Juan

shuddered at the thought of begging. He took his meals in some tavern

or other in the lowest quarter of Madrid, ate just enough to keep

from starving, and for two cents he was allowed to sleep in a hovel

between beggars and evil-doers. Once they stole his trousers while he

was asleep, and left him a pair of cotton ones in their stead. This

was in November.

Poor Juan, who had always cherished the thought of his brother's

return, now in the depths of his misery nursed his chimera with

redoubled faith. He had a letter written and sent to Havana. As he

had no idea how his brother could be reached, the letter bore no

direction. He made all manner of inquiries, but to no effect, and

he spent long hours on his knees, hoping that Heaven might send

Santiago to his rescue. His only happy moments were those spent in

prayer, as he knelt behind a pillar in the far-off corner of some

solitary church, breathing the acrid odors of dampness and melting

wax, listening to the flickering sputter of the tapers and the faint

murmur rising from the lips of the faithful in the nave of the

temple. His innocent soul then soared above the cruelties of life

and communed with God and the Holy Mother. From his early childhood

devotion to the Virgin had been deeply rooted in his heart. As he had

never known his mother, he instinctively turned to the mother of God

for that tender and loving protection which only a woman can give a

child. He had composed a number of hymns and canticles in her honor,

and he never fell asleep without pressing his lips to the image of

the Carmen, which he wore on his neck.

There came a day, however, when heaven and earth forsook him. Driven

from his last shelter, without a crust to save him from starvation,

or a cloak to protect him from the cold, he realized with terror

that the time had come when he would have to beg. A great struggle

took place in his soul. Shame and suffering made a desperate stand

against necessity. The profound darkness which surrounded him

increased the anguish of the strife; but hunger conquered in the

end. He prayed for strength with sobs, and resigned himself to his

fate. Still, wishing to disguise his humiliation, he determined to

sing in the streets, at night only. His voice was good, and he had a

rare knowledge of the art of singing. It occurred to him that he had

no means of accompaniment. But he soon found another unfortunate,

perhaps a trifle less wretched than himself, who lent him an old

and broken guitar. He mended it as best he could, and with a voice

hoarse with tears he went out into the street on a frosty December

night. His heart beat violently; his knees trembled under him. When

he tried to sing in one of the central thoroughfares, he found he

could not utter a sound. Suffering and shame seemed to have tied a

knot in his throat. He groped about until he had found a wall to lean

against. There he stood for awhile, and when he felt a little calmer

he began the tenor's aria from the first act of "Favorita." A blind

singer who sang neither couplets nor popular songs soon excited some

curiosity among the passers-by, and in a few minutes a crowd had

gathered around him. There was a murmur of surprise and admiration at

the art with which he overcame the difficulties of the composition,

and many a copper was dropped in the hat that dangled from his arm.

After this he sang the aria of the fourth act of "Africana." But too

many had stopped to listen, and the authorities began to fear that

this might be a cause of disturbance; for it is a well-established

fact with officials of the police force that people who congregate in

the streets to hear a blind man sing are always prompted by motives

of rebellion,--it means a peculiar hostility to the institutions; in

a word, an attitude thoroughly incompatible with the peace of society

and the security of the State. Accordingly, a policeman caught Juan

energetically by the arm and said, "Here, here! go straight home now,

and don't let me catch you stopping at any more street corners."

"I'm doing no harm!"

"You are blocking the thoroughfare. Come, move on, move on, if you

don't want to go to the lock-up."

It is really encouraging to see how careful our authorities are in

clearing the streets of blind singers; and I really believe, in spite

of all that has been said to the contrary, that if they could keep

them equally free from thieves and murderers, they would do so with

pleasure. Juan went back to his hovel with a heavy heart, for he was

by nature shrinking and timid, and was grieved at having disturbed

the peace and given rise to the interference of the executive power.

He had made twenty-seven cents. With this he bought something to eat

on the following day, and paid rent for the little pile of straw on

which he slept. The next night he went out again and sang a few more

operatic arias; but the people again crowded around him, and once

more a policeman felt himself called upon to interfere, shouting at

him to move on. But how could he? If he kept moving on, he would not

make a cent. He could not expect the people to follow him. Juan moved

on, however, on and on, because he was timid, and the mere thought of

infringing the laws, of disturbing even momentarily the peace of his

native land, was worse than death to him. So his earnings rapidly

decreased. The necessity of moving on, on the one hand, and the fact

that his performances had lost the charm of novelty, which in Spain

always commands its price, daily deprived him of a few coppers. With

what he brought home at night he could scarcely buy enough food to

keep him alive. The situation was desperate. The poor boy saw but one

luminous point in the clouded horizon of his life, and that was his

brother's return to Madrid. Every night as he left his hovel with his

guitar swinging from his shoulder he thought, "If Santiago should be

in Madrid and hear me sing, he would know me by my voice." And this

hope, or rather this chimera, alone gave him the strength to endure

life. However, there came again a day in which his anguish knew no

limit. On the preceding night he had earned only six coppers. It had

been so cold! This was Christmas Eve. When the morning dawned upon

the world, it found Madrid wrapped in a sheet of snow six inches

thick. It snowed steadily all day long, which was a matter of little

consequence to the majority of people, and was even a cause of much

rejoicing among æsthetes generally. Those poets in particular who

enjoy what is called easy circumstances spent the greater part of

the day watching the flakes through the plate-glass of their study

windows, meditating upon and elaborating those graceful and ingenious

similes that cause the audiences at the theatre to shout, "Bravo,

bravo!" or those who read their verses to exclaim, "What a genius

that young fellow is!"

Juan's breakfast had been a crust of stale bread and a cup of watery

coffee. He could not divert his hunger by contemplating the beauty

of the snow,--in the first place, because he was blind, and in the

second, because, even had he not been blind, he would have had some

difficulty in seeing it through the patched and filthy panes of his

hovel. He spent the day huddled in a corner on his straw mattress,

evoking scenes of his childhood and caressing the sweet dream of his

brother's return. At nightfall he grew very faint, but necessity

drove him into the streets to beg. His guitar was gone. He had sold

it for sixty cents on a day of similar hardship. The snow fell with

the same persistence. His legs trembled as they had when he sang

for the first time, but now it was from hunger rather than shame.

He groped about as best he could, with great lumps of mud above his

ankles. The silence told him that there was scarcely a soul on the

street. The carriages rolled noiselessly along, and he once came

near being run over. In one of the central thoroughfares he began

to sing the first thing that came to his lips. His voice was weak

and hoarse. Nobody stopped to listen. "Let us try another street,"

thought he; and he went down the Avenue of San Jerónimo, walking

awkwardly in the snow, with a white coating on his shoulders and

water squirting from his shoes. The cold had begun to penetrate into

his very bones, and hunger gave him a violent pain. For a moment

with the cold and the pain came a feeling of faintness which made

him think that he was about to die, and lifting his spirit to the

Virgin of the Carmen, his protectress, he exclaimed in his anguish,

"Mother, have pity!" And after pronouncing these words he felt

relieved and walked, or rather dragged himself, to the Plaza de las

Cortes. There he grasped a lamp-post, and under the impression of the

Virgin's protection sang Gounod's "Ave Maria." Still nobody stopped

to hear him. The people of Madrid were at the theatres, at the cafés,

or at home, dancing their little ones on their knees in the glow

of the hearth,--in the warmth of their love. The snow continued to

fall steadily, copiously, with the evident purpose of furnishing a

topic for the local column of the morning paper, where it would be

described in a thousand delicate phrases. The occasional passers-by

hurried along muffled up to their ears under their umbrellas. The

lamp-posts had put on their white night-caps, from under which

escaped thin rays of dismal light. The silence was broken only by

the vague and distant rumble of carriages and by the light fall of

the snowflakes, that sounded like the faint and continuous rustle

of silk. The voice of Juan alone vibrated in the stillness of the

night, imploring the mother of the unprotected; and his chant seemed

a cry of anguish rather than a hymn of praise, a moan of sadness and

resignation falling dreary and chill, like snow upon the heart.

And his cry for pity was in vain. In vain he repeated the sweet name

of Mary, adjusting it to the modulations of every melody. Heaven and

the Virgin were far away, it seemed, and could not hear him. The

neighbors of the plaza were near at hand, but they did not choose

to hear. Nobody came down to take him in from the cold; no window

was thrown open to drop him a copper. The passers-by, pursued, as it

were, by the fleet steps of pneumonia, scarcely dared stop. Juan's

voice at last died in his throat; he could sing no more. His legs

trembled under him; his hands lost their sense of touch. He took a

few steps, then sank on the sidewalk at the foot of the grating that

surrounds the square. He sat with his elbows on his knees and buried

his head in his hands. He felt vaguely that it was the last moment of

his life, and he again prayed, imploring the divine pity.

At the end of a few minutes he was conscious of being shaken by the

arm, and knew that a man was standing before him. He raised his head,

and taking for granted it was the old story about moving on, inquired

timidly,--

"Are you an officer?"

"No; I am no officer. What is the matter with you? Get up."

"I don't believe I can, sir."

"Are you very cold?"

"Yes, sir; but it isn't exactly that,--I haven't had anything to eat

to-day."

"I will help you, then. Come; up with you."

The man took Juan by both arms and stood him on his feet. He seemed

very strong.

"Now lean on me, and let us see if we can find a cab."

"But where are you going to take me?"

"Nowhere where you wouldn't want to go. Are you afraid?"

"No; I feel in my heart that you will help me."

"Come along, then. Let's see how soon I can get you something hot to

drink."

"God will reward you for this, sir; the Virgin will reward you. I

thought I was going to die there, against that grating."

"Don't talk about dying, man. The question now is to find a cab;

if we can only move along fast enough--What is the matter? Are you

stumbling?"

"Yes, sir. I think I struck a lamp-post. You see--as I am blind--"

"Are you blind?" asked the stranger, anxiously.

"Yes, sir."

"Since when?"

"I was born blind."

Juan felt his companion's arm tremble in his, and they walked along

in silence. Suddenly the man stopped and asked in a voice husky with

emotion,--

"What is your name?"

"Juan."

"Juan what?"

"Juan Martínez."

"And your father was Manuel Martínez, wasn't he,--musician of the

third artillery band?"

"Yes, sir."

The blind one felt the tight clasp of two powerful arms that almost

smothered him, and heard a trembling voice exclaim,--

"My God, how horrible, and how happy! I am a criminal, Juan! I am

your brother Santiago!"

And the two brothers stood sobbing together in the middle of the

street. The snow fell on them lightly. Suddenly Santiago tore himself

from his brother's embrace, and began to shout, intermingling his

words with interjections,--

"A cab! A cab! Isn't there a cab anywhere around? Curse my luck!

Come, Juanillo, try; make an effort, my boy; we are not so very far.

But where in the name of sense are all the cabs? Not one has passed

us. Ah, I see one coming, thank God! No; the brute is going in the

other direction. Here is another. This one is mine. Hello there,

driver! Five dollars if you take us flying to Number 13 Castellana."

And taking his brother in his arms as though he had been a mere

child, he put him in the cab and jumped in after him. The driver

whipped his horse, and off they went, gliding swiftly and noiselessly

over the snow. In the mean time Santiago, with his arms still around

Juan, told him something of his life. He had been in Costa Rica,

not Cuba, and had accumulated a respectable fortune. He had spent

many years in the country, beyond mail service and far from any

point of communication with Europe. He had written several letters

to his father, and had managed to get these on some steamer trading

with England, but had never received any answer. In the hope of

returning shortly to Spain, he had made no inquiries. He had been

in Madrid for four months. He learned from the parish record that

his father was dead; but all he could discover concerning Juan was

vague and contradictory. Some believed that he had died, while others

said that, reduced to the last stages of misery, he went through

the streets singing and playing on the guitar. All his efforts

to find him had been fruitless; but fortunately Providence had

thrown him into his arms. Santiago laughed and cried alternately,

showing himself to be the same frank, open-hearted, jovial soul

that Juan had loved so in his childhood. The cab finally came to

a stop. A man-servant opened the door, and Juan was fairly lifted

into the house. When the door closed behind him, he breathed a warm

atmosphere full of that peculiar aroma of comfort which wealth seems

to exhale. His feet sank in the soft carpet. Two servants relieved

him of his dripping clothes and brought him clean linen and a warm

dressing-gown. In the same room, before a crackling wood fire, he was

served a comforting bowl of hot broth, followed by something more

substantial, which he was made to take very slowly and with all the

precautions which his critical condition required. Then a bottle of

old wine was brought up from the cellar. Santiago was too restless

to sit still. He came and went, giving orders, interrupting himself

every minute to say,--

"How do you feel now, Juan? Are you warm enough? Perhaps you don't

care for this wine."

When the meal was over, the two brothers sat silently side by side

before the fire. Santiago then inquired of one of the servants if the

Señora and the children had already retired. On learning that they

had, he said to Juan, beaming with delight,--

"Can you play on the piano?"

"Yes."

"Come into the parlor, then. Let us give them a surprise."

He accordingly led him into an adjoining room and seated him

at the piano. He raised the top so as to obtain the greatest

possible vibration, threw open the doors, and went through all the

manoeuvres peculiar to a surprise,--tiptoeing, whispering, speaking

in a falsetto, and so much absurd pantomime that Juan could not help

laughing as he realized how little his brother had changed.

"Now, Juanillo, play something startling, and play it loud, with all

your might."

The blind boy struck up a military march. A quiver ran through the

silent house like that which stirs a music-box while it is being

wound up. The notes poured from the piano, hurrying, jostling one

another, but never losing their triumphant rhythm. Every now and

then Santiago exclaimed,--

"Louder, Juanillo! Louder!"

And the blind boy struck the notes with all his spirit and might.

"I see my wife peeping in from behind the curtains. Go on, Juanillo.

She is in her night-gown,--he, he! I am pretending not to see her. I

have no doubt she thinks I am crazy,--he, he! Go on, Juanillo."

Juan obeyed, although he thought the jest had been carried far

enough. He wanted to know his sister-in-law and kiss his nephews.

"Now I can just see Manolita. Hello! Paquito is up too. Didn't I tell

you we should surprise them? But I am afraid they will take cold.

Stop a minute, Juanito!"

And the infernal clamor was silenced.

"Come, Adela, Manolita, and Paquito, get on your things and come in

to see your uncle Juan. This is Juanillo, of whom you have heard me

speak so often. I have just found him in the street almost frozen to

death. Come, hurry and dress, all of you."

The whole family was soon ready, and rushed in to embrace the blind

boy. The wife's voice was soft and harmonious. To Juan it sounded

like the voice of the Virgin. He discovered, too, that she was

weeping silently at the thought of all his sufferings. She ordered a

foot-warmer to be brought in. She wrapped his legs in a cloak and put

a soft cushion behind his head. The children stood around his chair,

caressing him, and all listened with tears to the accounts of his

past misery. Santiago struck his forehead; the children stroked his

hands, saying,--

"You will never be hungry again, will you, uncle? Or go out without

a cloak and an umbrella? I don't want you to, neither does Manolita,

nor mamma, nor papa."

"I wager you will not give him your bed, Paquito," said Santiago,

trying to conceal his tears under his affected merriment.

"My bed won't fit him, papa! But he can have the bed in the guests'

chamber. It is a great bed, uncle, a big, big bed!"

"I don't believe I care to go to bed," said Juan. "Not just now at

any rate, I am so comfortable here."

"That pain has gone, hasn't it, uncle?" whispered Manolita, kissing

and stroking his hand.

"Yes, dear, yes,--God bless you! Nothing pains me now. I am happy,

very happy! Only I feel sleepy, so sleepy that I can hardly raise my

eyelids."

"Never mind us; sleep if you feel like it," said Santiago.

"Yes, uncle, sleep," repeated the children.

\* \* \* \* \*

And Juan fell asleep,--but he wakened in another world.

The next morning, at dawn, two policemen stumbled against a corpse in

the snow. The doctor of the charity hospital pronounced it a case of

congealing of the blood.

As one of the officers turned him over, face upward,--

"Look, Jiménez," said he; "he seems to be laughing."

[Illustration]

A CHRISTMAS IN THE FOREST.

From the French of ANDRÉ THEURIET.

Christmas Eve that year was bleak and cold, and the village seemed

benumbed. The houses were closed hermetically, and so were the

stables, from which came the muffled sound of animals chewing the

cud. From time to time the clacking of wooden shoes on the hardened

ground resounded through the deserted streets, then a door was

hastily opened and closed, and all relapsed into silence. It was

evident from the thick smoke rising through the chimneys into the

gray air that every family was huddled around its hearth while the

housewife prepared the Christmas supper. Stooping forward, with their

legs stretched out to the fire, their countenances beaming with

pleasure at the prospect of the morrow's festival and the foretaste

of the fat and juicy blood-sausages, the peasants laughed at the

north wind that swept the roads, at the frost that powdered the

trees of the forest, and the ice that seemed to vitrify the streams

and the river. Following their example, my friend Tristan and I spent

the livelong day in the old house of the Abbatiale at the corner of

the hearth, smoking our pipes and reading poetry. At sundown we had

grown tired of seclusion and determined to venture out.

"The forest must be a strange sight with this heavy frost," said I

to Tristan. "Suppose we take a turn through the wood after supper;

besides, I must see the sabotiers from Courroy about a little matter."

So we pulled on our gaiters, stuffed our pipes, wrapped ourselves in

our cloaks and mufflers, and penetrated into the wood.

We walked along cheerfully over the rugged, hardened soil of the

trenches furrowed with deep, frozen ruts. Through the copse on either

side we saw mysterious white depths. After a damp night the north

wind had transformed the mists and vapors that overhung the branches

into a tangle of snowy lace. In the half light of the gloaming we

could still distinguish the sparkling needles of the junipers, the

frosted puffs of the clematis, the bluish crystallizations of the

beech, and the silver filigree of the nut-trees. The silence was

broken by the occasional creaking of the frozen limbs, and every now

and then a breath of impalpable white dust dampened our cheeks as it

melted there.

We walked along at a steady pace, and in less than an hour caught

sight of the red and flickering glow of the sabotiers' camp pitched

on the edge of the forest above a stream that flowed down toward

the valley of Santonge. The settlement consisted of a spacious,

cone-shaped, dirt-coated hut and a cabin with board walls carefully

sealed with moss. The hut answered the combined purposes of

dormitory and kitchen; the cabin was used for the stowing away of

tools and wooden shoes, and also for the two donkeys employed in

the transportation of goods. The sabotiers, masters, apprentices,

friends, and children were seated on beech logs around the fire in

front of the hut, and their mobile silhouettes formed intensely black

profiles against the red of the fire. Three short posts driven into

the ground and drawn together at the top formed the crane, from which

hung an iron pot that simmered over the coals. An appetizing odor

of stewed hare escaped from the tin lid as it rose and fell under

the puffs of vapor. The master, a lively, nervous, hairy little man,

welcomed us with his usual cordiality.

"Sit down and warm yourselves," said he. "You find us preparing the

Christmas supper. I'm afraid we'll not sleep over soundly to-night.

My old woman is ill. I've fixed her a bed in the cabin where she'll

be more comfortable, and warmer on account of the animals. My boy has

gone to Santonge to get the doctor. There's no time to be lost. My

little girl is kept busy running from the cabin to the hut."

We had no sooner taken our seats around the fire than the snowflakes

began to whirl about in the stillness above us. They fell so thick

and fast that in less than a quarter of an hour we were compelled to

protect the fire with a hurdle covered with sackcloth.

"By my faith! gentlemen," said the sabotier, "you'll not be able to

start out again in this storm. You'll have to stay and have your

Christmas supper with us,--and taste of our stew."

The weather was certainly not tempting, and we accepted the

invitation. Besides, the adventure amused us, and we were delighted

at the prospect of a Christmas supper in the heart of the forest. An

hour later we were in the hut, and by the light of a miserable little

candle-end we had our Christmas supper, devouring our hare-stew with

a sharp appetite and washing it down with a draught of unfermented

wine that scraped our throats. The snow fell thicker and thicker,

wrapping the forest in a soft white wadding that deadened every

sound. Now and then the sabotier rose and went into the cabin, then

came back looking worried, listening anxiously for the good woman

from Santonge. Suddenly a few metallic notes, muffled by the snow,

rose softly from the depth of the valley. A similar sound from an

opposite direction rang out in answer, then followed a third and a

fourth, and soon a vague confusion of Christmas chimes floated over

the forest.

Our hosts, without interrupting the process of mastication and while

they passed around the wine-jug, tried to recognize the various

chimes by the fulness of the sounds.

"Those--now--those are the bells from Vivey. They are hardly any

louder than the sound of the donkey's hoofs on the stones."

"That is the bell of Auberive!"

"Yes; and that peal that sounds like the droning of a swarm of

beetles, that's the Grancey chimes."

During this discussion Tristan and I began to succumb to the combined

action of warmth and fully satisfied appetite. Our eyes blinked, and

before we knew it we fell asleep on the moss of the hut, lulled by

the music of the Christmas chimes. A piercing shriek followed by a

sound of joyful voices woke us with a start.

It had ceased snowing. The night was growing pale, and through the

little skylight we could see above the fleecy trees a faint light in

the sky, where a belated star hung quivering.

"It is a boy!" shouted the master, bursting in upon us. "Gentlemen,

if you think you would like to see him, why, I should be very glad;

and it might bring him luck."

We went crunching over the snow after him to the cabin, lighted by a

smoky lamp. On her bed of laths and moss lay the young mother, weak

and exhausted, her head thrown back, her pale face framed in by a

mass of frowzy auburn hair. The "good woman," assisted by the little

girl, was bundling up the new-comer, who wailed feebly. The two

donkeys, amazed at so much stir and confusion, turned their kindly

gray faces toward the bed, shook their long ears, and gazed around

them with wide, intelligent eyes, blowing through their nostrils

puffs of warm vapor that hung like a thin mist on the air. At the

foot of the bed stood a young shepherd, with a black and white

she-goat and a new-born kid.

"I have brought you the she-goat, Ma'am Fleuriot," said he, in his

Langrois drawl. "You can have her for the boy as long as you wish."

The goat was baaing, the new-born child wailed, and the donkeys

breathed loudly. There was something primitive and biblical about the

whole scene.

Without, in the violet light of the dawn, while a distant church-bell

scattered its early notes through the air, one of the young

apprentices, dancing in the snow to keep warm, sang out at the top

of his lungs that old Christmas carol, which seemed then full of new

meaning and poetry,--

"He is born, the little Child.

Ring out, hautbois! ring out, bagpipes!

He is born, the little Child;

Let us sing the happy news."

[Illustration]

THE LOUIS-D'OR.

From the French of FRANÇOIS COPPÉE.

When Lucien de Hem saw his last bill for a hundred francs clawed

by the banker's rake, when he rose from the roulette-table where

he had just lost the débris of his little fortune scraped together

for this supreme battle, he experienced something like vertigo, and

thought that he should fall. His brain was muddled; his legs were

limp and trembling. He threw himself upon the leather lounge that

circumscribed the gambling-table. For a few moments he mechanically

followed the clandestine proceedings of that hell in which he had

sullied the best years of his youth, recognized the worn profiles of

the gamblers under the merciless glare of the three great shadeless

lamps, listened to the clicking and the sliding of the gold over the

felt, realized that he was bankrupt, lost, remembered that in the

top drawer of his dressing-table lay a pair of pistols,--the very

pistols of which General de Hem, his father, had made noble use at

the attack of Zaatcha; then, overcome by exhaustion, he sank into a

heavy sleep.

When he awoke his mouth was clammy, and his tongue stuck to his

palate. He realized by a hasty glance at the clock that he had

scarcely slept a half-hour, and he felt the imperious necessity of

going out to get a breath of the fresh night air. The hands on the

dial pointed exactly to a quarter of twelve. As he rose and stretched

his arms it occurred to him that it was Christmas Eve, and by one of

those ironical freaks of the memory, he felt as though he were once

more a child, ready to stand his little boot on the hearth before

going to bed. Just then old Dronski, one of the pillars of the trade,

the traditional Pole, wrapped in the greasy worn cloak adorned with

frogs and passementerie, came up to Lucien muttering something behind

his dirty grayish beard.

"Lend me five francs, will you, Monsieur? I haven't stirred from this

place for two days, and for two whole days seventeen hasn't come out

once. You may laugh at me all you like, but I'll bet you my fist that

when the clock strikes twelve, seventeen will be the winning number."

Lucien de Hem shrugged his shoulders; and fumbling through his

pockets, he found that he had not even money enough to comply with

that feature of gambling etiquette known among the frequenters of

the establishment as "the Pole's hundred cents." He passed into the

antechamber, put on his hat and cloak, and disappeared down the

narrow stairway with the agility of people who have a fever. During

the four hours which Lucien had spent in the den it had snowed

heavily, and the street, one of those narrow wedges between two rows

of high buildings in the very heart of Paris, was intensely white.

Above, in the calm blue black of the sky, cold stars glittered. The

exhausted gambler shivered under his furs, and hurried along with a

blank despair in his heart, thinking of the pistols that awaited him

in the top drawer of his dressing-table. He had not gone a hundred

feet when he stopped suddenly before a heart-rending spectacle.

On a stone bench, near the monumental doorway of a wealthy residence,

sat a little girl six or seven years old, barely covered by a ragged

black gown. She had fallen asleep there in spite of the bitter cold,

her body bent forward in a pitiful posture of resigned exhaustion.

Her poor little head and her dainty shoulder had moulded themselves

into the angle of the freezing wall. One of her worn slippers had

fallen from her dangling foot and lay in the snow before her. Lucien

de Hem mechanically thrust his hand into his vest-pocket, but he

remembered that he had not even been able to fee the club waiter. He

went up to the child, however, impelled by an instinct of pity. He

meant, no doubt, to pick her up and take her home with him, to give

her shelter for the night, when suddenly he saw something glitter in

the little slipper at his feet. He stooped. It was a louis-d'or.

Some charitable soul--a woman, no doubt--had passed there, and at

the pathetic sight of that little shoe in the snow had remembered

the poetic Christmas legend, and with discreet fingers had dropped a

splendid gift, so that the forsaken little one might still believe in

the presents of the Child-Christ, and might awake with renewed faith

in the midst of her misery.

A gold louis! That meant many days of rest and comfort for the little

beggar. Lucien was just about to awaken her and surprise her with

her good fortune when, in a strange hallucination, he heard a voice

in his ear, which whispered with the drawling inflection of the old

Pole: "I haven't stirred from this place for two days, and for two

whole days seventeen hasn't come out once. I'll bet you my fist that

when the clock strikes twelve, seventeen will be the winning number."

Then this youth, who was twenty-three years of age, the descendant

of a race of honest men,--this youth who bore a great military name,

and had never been guilty of an unmanly act,--conceived a monstrous

thought; an insane desire took possession of him. He looked anxiously

up and down the street, and having assured himself that he had

no witness, he knelt, and reaching out cautiously with trembling

fingers, stole the treasure from the little shoe, then rose with a

spring and ran breathlessly down the street. He rushed like a madman

up the stairs of the gambling-house, flung open the door with his

fist, and burst into the room at the first stroke of midnight. He

threw the gold-piece on the table and cried,--

"Seventeen!"